

Lighthouse Management

A Balancing Act by the U.S. Coast Guard

This nation's lighthouses have served as beacons for the safe passage of mariners for over 200 years. Lighthouses were originally constructed by the federal government to provide safe and easy navigation into the harbors of the United States. As the federal heir to the functions and responsibilities of the Lighthouse Board and the Bureau of Lighthouses, the U.S. Coast Guard is the nation's largest single owner of lighthouse properties. Lighthouses came under the management of the U.S. Coast Guard in 1939, when the Bureau of Lighthouses was merged into that agency as part of the Department of the Treasury. Today, lighthouses continue to function within the U.S. Coast Guard, Department of Transportation, as a part of the federal navigation system.

The lighthouse structure serves as an aid to navigation in several ways. Lighthouse towers, placed in highly visible coastal locations, provide navigators with distinct visual landmarks. At night and during inclement weather, the characteristics of the light beacons provide a visual aid. Lighthouse properties can also contain fog signals, fog detectors, and radiobeacons. Many of the traditional light stations included a complex of mutually-supporting structures. Before automation, maintenance of the light and supporting structures involved a variety of activities that could only be provided by resident keepers. The remote location of most of the lighthouses required housing and transportation for the keepers. Hence, in addition to the light tower, a light station might include an oil house, keeper's dwelling, cistern, boathouse, fog signal building, and sufficient property to grow crops and raise livestock for subsistence and manage waste materials. In the case of offshore lights, the tower was often built to include space for a dwelling, cistern, fog signal, and storage for a boat and oil.

Traditional lighthouse construction methods and materials assumed that keepers would devote frequent attention to maintenance. Changes in technology following World War II allowed the automation of many lighthouse functions, which perform the same functions, but at a lower cost. Lighthouse properties, however, still require frequent attention by human beings to maintain the

integrity of the structures and materials. This level of maintenance, however, can no longer be adequately provided by U.S. Coast Guard personnel.

At present, all historic lighthouses managed by the U.S. Coast Guard are automated, except for Boston Light which remains staffed, as required by law. Keeper's dwellings at a small number of additional shoreside lights, where the property is convenient to nearby staffed Coast Guard units, continue to house U.S. Coast Guard personnel. The towers themselves have become less valuable to the service because, with modern automated beacons, it is more cost effective to construct and maintain an aid to navigation on a steel structure or buoy, rather than inside the lantern of a traditional lighthouse tower. Thus, in many locations, the traditional lighthouse tower has been found to have little value to the U.S. Coast Guard mission, other than to provide a visual aid to mariners during daylight and good weather.

Because automated lights do not require the day-to-day care of keepers to keep the light signals operating, the structures no longer receive the preventive maintenance that the keepers normally provided. Without this daily attention to maintenance, the normal deterioration of the tower and outbuildings accelerates. Lighthouses are particularly susceptible to the harsh natural environment in which they were constructed. In the last 40 years, the U.S. Coast Guard has found that current maintenance requirements that meet the standards of the National Historic Preservation Act have become very costly.

Federal management of historic lighthouses is a complex endeavor. A variety of legal mandates and public processes also influence their care—historic preservation mandates, federal budget processes, federal property management requirements, technological advancements, public and Congressional interests. The U.S. Coast Guard has a strong focus, with substantial Congressional and public support, on the mission of assisting safe navigation for mariners. Historic lighthouses are only one tool that provides a visual aid in performing this mission. As the money and personnel resources within the U.S. Coast Guard have become more constrained, the resources available to maintain historic lighthouse structures have also become more scarce. Thus, the U.S. Coast

Historic view of Boston Harbor Light Station, the only remaining station to be manned through an Act of Congress. Courtesy U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office.

Guard has been forced to seek alternative means to maintain historic lighthouse structures.

Federal property management requirements also substantially impact lighthouse management. The federal government, in general, is mandated to continually review its real property holdings, with the intent of divesting those holdings that cannot be justified for agency missions. The Coast Guard periodically reviews the operational need for each light and the property on which it is located.

Decisions are made with input from various navigation users such as other military services, harbor pilots, commercial shipping concerns, commercial fishermen, and recreational boaters. If a

lighthouse site, or a significant portion of a site, is no longer required as an aid to navigation, the Coast Guard considers whether it might be used for other missions. The mandates of federal property management dictate that lighthouse properties or marketable portions of properties no longer needed by the Coast Guard for its missions be reported to the General Services Administration (GSA) for transfer or sale to others.

The federal budget process is another substantial influence on the Service's management of lighthouses. The Coast Guard has always maintained a strong operational focus which, in the case of lighthouses, has meant the proper functioning of the aids to navigation signal for mariners. Preservation efforts, recognized by the Coast Guard as important, have a lower priority than the Service's primary mission of providing reliable and cost-efficient aids to navigation. More importantly, Congress mandated preservation of historic properties without attaching the appropriate funding required for complete preservation and maintenance of lighthouses. Recent developments in the federal budget process, such as the Government Performance Review Act and public support for a smaller federal government, have only made lighthouse preservation efforts more difficult.

In order to meet the public's expectations and to comply with the National Historic

Preservation Act, as well as the other complex property management and budgetary mandates, the U.S. Coast Guard has pursued several approaches. As funds are available, the Coast Guard undertakes lighthouse maintenance and rehabilitation projects. Leasing of historic lighthouse properties has been successfully used for several years as a means to improve lighthouse maintenance and public access. Transfer of excess

property, through the GSA, has successfully placed lighthouse properties under the management of organizations better equipped to preserve their historic nature. The U.S. Coast Guard also generally supports legislative mandates, initiated by



others, to transfer lighthouse properties to federal and non-federal preservation groups.

Leasing of historic lighthouses has been successful in improving maintenance of these properties where the lighthouse is easily accessible to the general public. Since 1985, the U.S. Coast Guard has operated its leasing program under a programmatic agreement among the Department of Transportation, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers. Typically, the U.S. Coast Guard seeks to lease the property for up to 30 years to an entity which will use and maintain the property in a manner that is compatible with its historic nature. As a result of a Congressionally-mandated review of lighthouse management policy in 1992, the Coast Guard has also developed a more aggressive strategy to market the availability of lighthouse properties for leasing, in the hope of benefitting more lighthouse properties. While the U.S. Coast Guard retains the authority to decide which lighthouse properties are appropriate to lease, available properties will be more widely advertised. The more aggressive marketing process is contained in an amended programmatic agreement executed in 1996.

As a result of a lighthouse policy review conducted in 1992, the U.S. Coast Guard has been evaluating lighthouse properties on the basis of its minimum operational needs and, at several loca-

tions, has identified the tower, associated structures, and land as possible excess property. Lighthouse properties that are no longer needed as aids to navigation are identified as excess to mission needs and are normally transferred out of U.S. Coast Guard management through the process managed by GSA and defined in current federal property management regulations. In some cases, state and local interests have been able to obtain ownership of excess historic lighthouse properties directly, by convincing their Congressional representatives to support legislation to mandate a transfer from the federal government.

In cases where the only U.S. Coast Guard mission need is for the lighted aid to navigation, the tower, associated buildings and land holdings may be excess property. In these cases, U.S. Coast Guard operational interests may continue to be served by identifying the excess property and retaining easements for servicing the navigational signal. The excess property may be made available to historic preservation interests through the normal GSA process or through legislative mandates. Most recently, in The 1996 Coast Guard Authorization Act, Congress mandated that a total of 44 lighthouse properties be transferred to other parties better able to maintain their historic

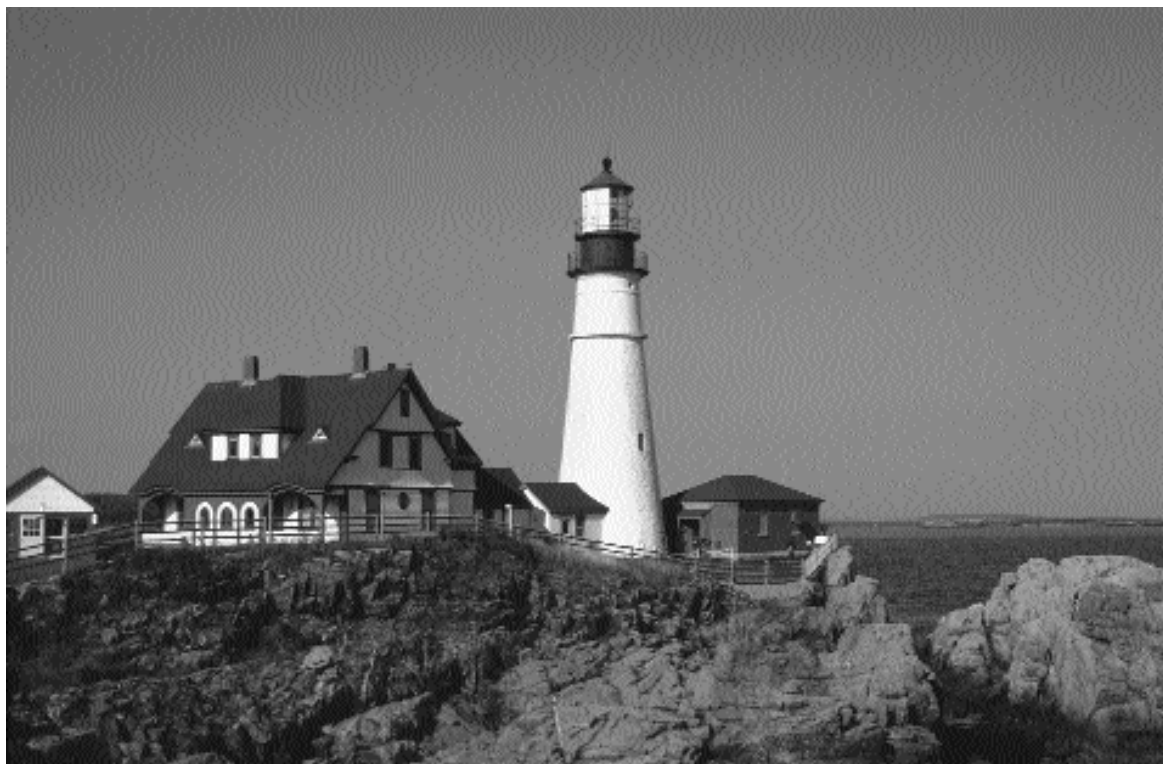
nature, while retaining easements for the lighted aid to navigation.

As trustee of the nation's maritime safety, the U.S. Coast Guard has been generally successful in managing over 450 lighthouse properties. When the towers are needed to support an active aid to mariners, the service continues to maintain and preserve historic lighthouse properties. The U.S. Coast Guard, however, must balance the requirements of its numerous missions, federal property management, historic preservation, and the federal budgetary processes. The U.S. Coast Guard has and will continue to explore alternative methods of preserving these significant historic structures through leasing and transferring their management. These structures are, and will always be, a significant part of the history and traditions of the service. Mindful of the more than 200-year history of the federal lighthouse service, the U.S. Coast Guard will make every attempt to find effective means of securing adequate preservation of historic lighthouses.

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Portland Head Light Station, Cape Elizabeth, Maine, was recently transferred from the Coast Guard to the town of Cape Elizabeth which maintains the keeper's quarters as a museum. Since the light continues as an active aid to navigation, the Coast Guard has access to the optic and sound signal. NPS photo by Candace Clifford, 1994.



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